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U.S. Trade Deficit Surges to Highest Level Since 2008

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer

Washington — The U.S. trade deficit has surged to \$53.1 billion — its highest level in almost three years — as a drop in the country's exports exceeded a decline in imports from abroad.

June's trade deficit was up 4.4 percent from May, largely due to a 2.3 percent drop in total exports to \$170.9 billion.

Industrial supplies and materials led the export decline, while consumer goods exports edged up to set a new monthly record of \$15 billion in June, according to figures released August 11 by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Despite this decrease, acting Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank said exports remain a driving force in the U.S. economy.

"Although numbers in June were lower than we'd hoped, exports have grown at a steady pace for the first half of the year, posting 15.8 percent growth over last year," Blank said in a statement August 11.

The Commerce Department said exports during the first six months of 2011 have totaled \$1,027.9 billion, a significant increase from the \$887.6 billion in exports from the same period in 2010.

Blank said the U.S. economy is on track to meet President Obama's National Export Initiative goal of doubling exports by the end of 2014, a part of his effort to help the country's economic recovery and to generate new jobs.

U.S. imports declined nearly 1 percent from May to \$223.9 billion, led largely by a drop in imports of industrial supplies and materials. However, imports of foods, feeds and beverages increased to set a new record of \$9.2 billion. The import bill was also reduced slightly by a drop in the price of crude oil.

The June figures showed a trade surplus with Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore and Egypt. Trade deficits were recorded with China, the European Union, Mexico, Japan, Germany, Venezuela, Nigeria, Canada, Ireland, Taiwan and South Korea.

The trade deficit, calculated as the difference in value between the goods and services imported and the goods and services exported, increased \$6.2 billion from June 2010, with exports up 12.9 percent and imports up by 13 percent.

Blank said that at this "fragile time in the world

economy," the Obama administration "will continue to innovate to help our businesses compete globally, stabilize the economy, strengthen the middle class and accelerate hiring in communities and towns across the nation."

U.S. Wants More International Pressure to End Syrian Violence

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration is urging countries with significant economic ties to Syria to join the United States in increasing pressure on the Syrian government to end the violence against the Syrian people and allow peaceful democratic change to occur in the country, said Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Speaking on the CBS Television Network August 11, Clinton said the United States has imposed tough economic sanctions targeting Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, top Syrian officials and Syrian businesses tied to the regime in response to the government's violent crackdown against demonstrators who have been calling for political change.

The Obama administration is also spending "an enormous amount of diplomatic time and effort" to urge others in the international community to condemn the Assad regime's actions and take additional steps aimed at convincing it to end the violence, she said.

Clinton said Syria has not been a major U.S. economic partner, and other countries could have a greater impact on the Assad regime. "We have such a small stake in what they produce and what they market," she said. "The real trick is to convince the Europeans and the Arabs and the Chinese and the Indians and others," she said.

She urged those countries to impose sanctions on Syria's oil and gas industry and for Russia to end its arms sales to the Syrian government.

Clinton said it is important for the Syrian people to know that "the United States is on the side of a peaceful transition to democracy," and it supports their right to choose their own leaders and have "the kind of democratic institutions that will maximize their individual opportunities."

She paid tribute to Syrians who have been risking and losing their lives in the protests and urged the opposition to unify to make it easier for them to accept outside assistance. She also said the opposition should adopt an inclusive agenda for democratic change that will encourage members of all of Syria's diverse communities.

There are Syrians who have not supported the pro-

democracy demonstrations because they are “worried about what could come next” after the Assad regime, Clinton said. She urged the opposition to adopt a unified agenda “[s]o if you’re a Christian, if you’re a Kurd, if you’re a Druze, if you’re an Alawite, if you’re a Sunni, inside Syria there will be a place for you in the future.”

The Obama administration estimates that the Assad regime has killed more than 2,000 Syrians since the demonstrations began in March. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters August 11 that the violence in Syria “continues at extremely horrific levels” as the government’s security forces carry out operations across the country.

“There are house-to-house raids as recently as yesterday in Deir al-Zour and in Homs. Prominent members of the local coordinating committees and other activist networks have been wrapped up,” she said.

“The local coordinating committees estimate that we have 22 dead at the hands of security forces on August 10 and 34 dead on August 9. We have some 30,000 people still in detention, in some cases in absolutely repulsive, disgusting conditions. There are reports from witnesses who have been inside prisons that some of these prisoners are being kept in cages and in the courtyards of prisons and in schools,” Nuland said.

The Obama administration has said that Syria would be “a better place without Assad” and that the country’s future should be decided by the Syrian people. Nuland called on the Assad regime to end the violence, return its forces to their barracks and allow “a real democratic transition to start.”

“Our focus is on doing what we can to increase the international pressure on [Assad], to support those who want a democratic future for Syria,” she said. Nuland urged countries that trade with Syria, especially its oil and gas sector, to stop “so that the pinch will be felt and none of the revenue from this can go to fueling this violence.”

Nuland also said U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford met with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem in Damascus August 11 and told him that Syria will face increasing U.S. and global pressure if the violence does not end.

Ford told Mualem that President Assad’s “empty rhetoric” about instituting democratic reforms “isn’t going to suffice,” Nuland said.

“He challenged the regime’s lip service about enacting reforms, and he called for free and open access for the media and also for strict compliance with Vienna Convention obligations to protect diplomatic personnel,”

Nuland said.

Data on Food Security Helps Ease Human Toll of Famine

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington — The alerts read like signposts to disaster:

In March: “Forecasts poor, crisis likely to worsen.”

In May: “Failure of long rains deepens food insecurity.”

And then July: “Famine in southern Somalia.”

These alerts about the danger of food insecurity in the Horn of Africa began in August 2010, and came from an organization that lives up to its name: the Famine Early Warning System Network, known as FEWS NET.

“We saw that rainfall failed first in the season that went from October to December,” said FEWS NET program manager John Scicchitano of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). “Rains failed again in the season from April to June.”

The U.S. government and other donors took notice of the FEWS NET warnings and began to prepare for food insecurity in eastern Africa, as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton explained. Then in July the situation escalated from insecurity to famine in several regions of Somalia.

“The United States government has worked with our partners over the last year to pre-position food in the region,” Clinton said, “increase funding for early warning systems, and strengthen non-food assistance in the feeding, health, water and sanitation sectors.”

But still, the region’s worst drought in 60 years has led to famine. The humanitarian situation has reached the proportions of disaster, and food insecurity affects more than 12 million people through the region. But famine is confined so far to southern Somalia, Scicchitano said in an interview, where some 3 million people live in affected areas.

“We were most successful in mitigating impacts in Ethiopia and Kenya,” he said.

U.S. officials blame the militant group al-Shabaab for preventing the delivery of food assistance where it is needed, thus allowing food shortages to escalate to famine in the region of Somalia it controls.

FEWS NET also provides data in support of USAID’s effort to establish greater resilience against famine in the long term. In a region where grazing animals are a

significant part of the agricultural sector, Scicchitano said, assistance programs are in place to give herders greater capacity to sustain their animals through drought.

FEWS NET was created in the aftermath of a disastrous famine in the early 1980s that hit the continent from West Africa to Ethiopia. The organization monitors about 30 famine-prone countries around the world and collects mountains of data from diverse sources to constantly evaluate levels of food security. FEWS NET alerts give national governments, international agencies and donor nations information they need to make life-saving preparations.

Scicchitano said FEWS NET accumulates real-time data about weather, crops and livestock to track the course of food security. He describes satellite images collected by NASA that show analysts more about the crops than farmers may know themselves.

"It shows us midway through the crop season, how are those crops developing? Are we looking at a normal year? Are we looking at a year when rains have failed altogether, or is it an excellent year or somewhere in between?" he said.

The analysts also study people and families: what they eat, where they grow it, how they buy it and what might happen if food supplies are disrupted.

Understanding the array of data that contributes to food security or the lack of it has helped ease the toll of widespread hunger, whether it results from a failed growing season or a natural disaster such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Despite widespread destruction and homelessness, famine did not occur in that disaster because a targeted humanitarian response, informed by FEWS NET analysis, helped meet emergency needs in the Caribbean nation.

Just as FEWS NET grew out of a disaster, Scicchitano said, the analysis FEWS NET conducts today will create a stronger body of data to plan for food security in the future. It is widely acknowledged that global agriculture must step up production in the decades ahead if the food needs of growing populations are to be met. Scicchitano said achieving that goal will require well-founded decisions about which investments might produce the greatest yields for the future.

"If we can make good investments, we can combat hunger," Scicchitano said, "and FEWS NET can contribute to that."

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